

## Five Faces of Oppression

Iris Marion Young

Politics is partly a struggle over the language people use to describe social and political experience. Most people in the United States would not use the term “oppression” to name injustice in this society. For a minority of Americans, on the other hand – such as socialists, radical feminists, American Indian activists, black activists, gay and lesbian activists, and others identifying with new left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s – oppression is a central category of political discourse. Speaking the political language in which oppression is a central word involves adopting a whole mode of analyzing and evaluating social structures and practices which is quite incommensurate with the language of liberal individualism that dominates political discourse in the US.

Consequently, those of us who identify with at least one of the movements I have named have a major political project: we must persuade people that the discourse of oppression makes sense of much of our social experience. We are ill prepared for this task, however, if we have no clear account of the meaning of the concept of oppression. While we commonly find the term used in the diverse

philosophical and theoretical literature spawned by radical social movements in the US, we find little direct discussion of the meaning of the concept of oppression as used by these movements.

In this chapter I offer some explication of the concept as I understand its use by new social movements in the US since the 1960s. I offer you an explication of this concept, an unfolding of its meaning. I do not think the concept of oppression can be strictly defined, that is, corralled within one clear boundary. There is no attribute or set of attributes that all oppressed people have in common.

In the following account of oppression I reflect on the situation and experience of those groups said by new left social movements to be oppressed in US society: at least women, blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and most other Spanish-speaking Americans, Native Americans, Jews, lesbians, gay men, Arabs, Asians, old people, working-class people, poor people, and physically or mentally disabled people.

Obviously, these groups are not oppressed to the same degree or in the same ways. In the most general sense, all oppressed people share some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. Nevertheless, reflection on the concrete uses of the term “oppression” in radical political discourse convinces me that the term

Iris Marion Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” pp. 270–90 from *Philosophical Forum* 19(4), 1998. Reprinted by permission of Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

refers to several distinct structures or situations. I label these with five disparate categories: exploitation, marginality, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Before I unfold these categories, though, I need to discuss some issues of social ontology relevant to placing the concept of oppression.

### A New Left Revision of the Concept of Oppression

One of the reasons that many people would not use the term "oppression" to describe our society is that they do not understand the term in the same way as do radicals. In its traditional usage, which most people retain, "oppression" means the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group. Thus many Americans would agree with radicals in applying the term to the situation of black South Africans under apartheid. Traditionally, "oppression" also carries a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination. The Hebrews were oppressed in Egypt, and many uses of the term in the West invoke this paradigm.

Dominant political discourse may use the term to describe societies other than our own, usually Communist or purportedly Communist societies. Within this anti-Communist rhetoric, both tyrannical and colonialist implications of the term appear. For the anti-Communist, communism denotes precisely the exercise of brutal tyranny over a whole people by a few rulers, and the will to conquer the world, bringing now independent peoples under that tyranny. In dominant political discourse, it is not legitimate to use the term to describe our society because "oppression" is the evil perpetrated by the Others.

New left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shifted the meaning of the concept. In its new usage, "oppression" designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power intends to keep them down, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society. In this new left usage, the tyranny of a ruling group over another, as in South Africa, must certainly be called oppressive. But "oppression" also refers to systemic and structural phenomena that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in the structural sense is part

of the basic fabric of a society, not a function of a few people's choice or policies. You won't eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid of the rulers or making some new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions. Thus one reason that "oppression" is not commonly used to describe injustice in our society is that the prevailing political discourse does not have a place in its social ontology for structuration and social groups.

Mirroring majority political discourse, philosophical discussions of justice and injustice rarely use the term "oppression," using instead the term "discrimination" to refer to some of the injustices radicals call "oppression." Even radical philosophers tend to avoid the term "oppression." Although his analysis is clearly influenced by Black Marxism and Black Power movements, Bernard Boxill, for example, consistently uses the term "discrimination" to designate the injustice that blacks have suffered and continue to suffer in US society.<sup>1</sup> This is a symptom of the old majority political discourse has over our thinking, perhaps especially over philosophers, who in turn help legitimate that discourse by using it and giving it technical precision. By "discrimination" I mean conscious actions and policies by which members of a group are excluded from institutions or confined to inferior positions. Discrimination is often an instrument of oppression, and discriminatory practices are certainly part of some oppressions, but the concept of oppression is neither coincident with nor reducible to discrimination.

Discrimination is a methodologically individualist concept.<sup>2</sup> In recent years most courts have found that there has been discrimination only if particular victims of discrimination can be individually identified, that a particular agent can be identified as responsible for discrimination, and it can be shown that the agent knew its actions or policies were discriminatory. To be sure, the concept of discrimination can make reference to groups insofar as a discriminatory policy excludes a whole class of persons from some position or activity. Even when concerning groups, however, discrimination is usually an individualist concept insofar as it presupposes an identifiable agent who discriminates, and that the sum of discrimination is the sum of discriminatory acts.

The difference between the concept of discrimination and the concept of oppression

emerges most clearly with the insight that oppression often exists in the absence of overt discrimination. Though actions and policies that explicitly discriminated against members of particular groups were common in the United States not long ago, and have by no means disappeared, legislation and litigation in the past 20 years has greatly lessened overt policies of discrimination against most groups, with the outrageous exception of lesbians and gay men. Socialists, feminists, anti-racism activists, insist, however, that this serious reduction in overt and conscious policies of exclusion and segregation has done little to reduce the oppression that many groups have suffered and continue to suffer. This concept names the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of frequently unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchy and market mechanisms, in short, the normal ongoing processes of everyday life. As Marilyn Frye puts it, oppression refers to "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to be the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people."<sup>3</sup>

## B The Concept of Social Group

Oppression refers to structural phenomena that immobilize or reduce a group. But what is a group? To be in a group is to share with others a way of life that defines a person's identity and by which other people identify him or her. Political philosophy typically has no place for a specific concept of social group. When philosophers and political theorists discuss groups, they tend to conceive them either on the model of aggregates or associations, both of which are methodologically individualist concepts. Along with Marilyn Friedman and Larry May, I think it is important to distinguish the concept of group from both aggregate and association.<sup>4</sup>

Liberal sentiments sometimes prompt us to assert that grouping by race, sex, religion, ethnicity, region, and so on, ought to carry no more significance than grouping by hair color, height, or the make of car we drive. Such an invocation calls for groups to be considered as mere aggregates, a classification of persons according to some attribute they share. The logic of aggregates presumes a substantial

notion of the person to whom attributes are attached, and in that logical sense the person is prior to the collective. If we consider social groups as aggregates we imply that group membership does not define that person, but merely is a set of attributes, and that the collective is nothing other than the sum of the individuals with those attributes.

Political theorists tend to elide social groups more often with associations than aggregates.<sup>5</sup> By an association I mean a formally organized institution, such as a club, corporation, political party, church, college, union, etc. An individualist contract model of society applies to associations but not to groups. Individuals constitute associations, they come together as already formed persons and set them up, establishing rules, positions, and offices. Groups, on the other hand, constitute individuals. A subject's particular sense of history, sense of identity, affinity, and separateness, even the person's mode of reasoning, evaluating and expressing feeling are constituted at least partly by her or his group affinities. This does not mean that persons have no individual styles, or are unable to transcend or reject a group related identity, and it does not preclude persons having many aspects that are independent of these group identities. Since the form of group differentiation in modern societies implies that a single person usually belongs to several groups, it follows that individual subjects are not unified, but multiple, heterogeneous, and sometimes perhaps incoherent.

A person joins an association, and even if membership in it fundamentally affects one's life, one does not take that association membership to define one's very identity, in the way, for example, being Navajo might. Group affinity, on the other hand, has the character of what Heidegger calls "thrownness": one *finds oneself* as a member of a group, whose existence and relations one experiences as always already having been. For a person's identity is defined in relation to how others identify him or her, and they do so in terms of groups which always already have specific attributes, stereotypes, and norms associated with them, in reference to which a person's identity will be formed. From the thrownness of group affinity, it does not follow that one cannot leave groups and enter new ones. Many women become lesbian after identifying as heterosexual, and anyone who lives long enough becomes old. These cases illustrate thrownness precisely because such changes in

group affinity are experienced as a transformation in one's identity.

Despite the modern myth of a decline of parochial attachments and ascribed identities, group differentiation is endemic to modern society. As markets and administration increase the web of social interdependency on a world scale, and as more people encounter one another as strangers in cities and states, they retain and renew ethnic, locale, age, sex, and occupations group identifications, and form new ones in the processes of encounter.<sup>6</sup> No social group, moreover, is itself homogeneous, but mirrors in its own differentiations many of the groups in the wider society. Patterns of group differentiation are fluid, often undergoing rapid change. Before the nineteenth century, for example, homosexuality did not serve as a basis of group ascription and identification.<sup>7</sup>

Some writers, such as Milton Fisk, understand class as a primary example of a social group.<sup>8</sup> Others might be inclined to distinguish the concept of group from class on the grounds that class is a structural concept that does not include subjectivity or identity, and a group as I have defined it includes reference to identity and interaction.<sup>9</sup> In a way I agree with both approaches. As used in technical Marxian economic theory, the concept of class is more abstract and structural than the concept of social group. It refers specifically to a relation to the major means of production, whether one owns them and/or has major decision-making power about the movement of capital, how it is invested, and so on. Class denotes a relation to capitalist profit: who gets it, who decides who gets it and how it will be gotten, who contributes to its getting without getting it, or does none of these. These structural positions in themselves are too narrow to define social groups.

In a more colloquial and empirical sense, however, the term "class" also refers to a basis for interaction and conflict, an identity by which people recognize one another, and to that degree class names social groups as well as structural positions. The ruling class in the US, and in most other societies, is a social group, whose members tend to bond with a shared culture and world view, to have common interests, and to move within specific institutions. There is, however, no single social group of the "working class" correlating with that ruling class.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the difficulties of locating it in technical Marxian analysis, "middle-class" professionals and managers must be understood as a social group

distinct from "working-class" manufacturing, clerical and service workers and their families. Poor people, or what some theorists call the "underclass" may also constitute a social group.

Insofar as economic location and occupation significantly determine a person's self-understanding, perception of social relations and others, and insofar as such economic location in our society tends to be reproduced across generations, classes are certainly social groups in the sense I have discussed. Just how class will be defined will depend on the uses of the definition, for example, to understand the structural imperatives of accumulation, or to understand the motivation of particular persons to support certain policies.

Group differentiation does not necessarily imply oppression, however; groups can exist that are not oppressed. In the US, Catholics are a group in the sense I have discussed, but they are no longer an oppressed group. In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, Catholics are an oppressed group. Whether a group is oppressed depends on whether it is subject to one or more of the five conditions I shall discuss below. Despite the modern myth of a decline of parochial attachments and ascribed identities, I think that group differentiation is both an inevitable and desirable aspect of modern social processes. Social justice, then, requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group difference without oppression.

I have suggested that oppression is the inhibition of a group through a vast network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules. Oppression is structural or systemic. The systemic character of oppression implies that an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group. While structural oppression in our society involves relations among groups, these relations do not generally fit the paradigm of one group's consciously and intentionally keeping another down. Foucault suggests that to understand the meaning and operation of power in modern society we should look beyond the model of power as "sovereignty," a dyadic relation of ruler and subject, and instead analyze the exercise of power as the effect of liberal and humanized practices of education, bureaucratic administration, production and distribution of consumer goods, medical practice, and so on. The conscious action of many individuals daily contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression, but

those people are usually simply doing their jobs or living their lives, not understanding themselves as agents of oppression. Defining oppression as structural is an innovation of the new left usage of the term to describe our society. Many people understand oppression to refer only to a conscious tyranny of one individual or group over another, and for that reason will not use the term to describe injustices in our own society.

By denying that structural oppression is perpetrated by an identifiable agent of oppression I do not mean to suggest that within this system of oppression individual persons do not intentionally do things to harm others in oppressed groups. The raped woman, the beaten black youth, the locked-out worker, and the gay man harassed on the street are victims of intentional behavior by identifiable agents. Nor do I mean to suggest that specific groups are not beneficiaries of the oppression of other groups, and thus have an interest in their continued oppression. On the contrary, for every oppressed group there is a group that is *privileged* in relation to that group.

The concept of oppression has been used among radicals since the 1960s partly in reaction to some Marxist attempts to reduce the injustices of racism and sexism, for example, to the effects of class domination or bourgeois ideology. Racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia, some social movements asserted, are distinct forms of oppression with their own dynamics apart from the dynamics of class, even though they might interact with class oppression. From often heated discussions among socialists, feminists, and anti-racism activists in the last ten years, a consensus is emerging that many different groups must be said to be oppressed in our society, and that no group's or form of oppression can claim causal or moral primacy.<sup>11</sup> The same discussion has also come to understand that group differences cross individual lives in a multiplicity of ways that can entail privilege and oppression for the same person in different respects. Only a plural explication of the concept of oppression can appropriately capture these insights (cf. Maynard and Brittan pp. 2-8).

Accordingly, in the following sections I offer an explication of five faces of oppression as a useful set of categories and distinctions which I believe is comprehensive, in the sense that it covers all the groups said by new left social movements to be oppressed and covers all the ways they are oppressed. I derive the five faces of oppression from reflection

on the condition of these groups. Because different factors, or combinations of factors, constitute the oppression of different groups, making their oppression irreducible, I believe it is not possible to have one essential definition of oppression. With the following five categories, however, the oppression of any group can be described, as well as its similarities with and differences from the oppression of other groups.

### 1 *Exploitation*

The central function of Marx's theory of exploitation is to explain how class structure can exist in the absence of legally and normatively sanctioned class distinctions. In pre-capitalist societies domination is overt and carried on through direct political means. In both slave society and feudal society the right to appropriate the product of the labor of others partly defines class privilege, and these societies legitimate class distinctions with ideologies of natural superiority and inferiority.

Capitalist society, on the other hand, removes traditional juridically-enforced class distinctions and promotes a belief in the legal freedom of persons. Workers freely contract with employers, receive a wage, and no formal mechanisms of law or custom force them to work for that employer or any employer. Thus the mystery of capitalism arises: when everyone is formally free, how can there be class domination? Why does there continue to be class distinction between the wealthy, who own the means of production, and the mass of people, who work for them? The theory of exploitation answers this question.

Profit, the basis of capitalist power and wealth, is a mystery if we assume that in the market goods exchange at their values. Marx's use of the labor theory of value, however, dispels this mystery. Every commodity's value is a function of the labor time necessary for the production of labor power. Labor power is the one commodity which in the process of being consumed produces new value. Profit then comes from the difference between the actual labor and the value of that capacity to labor which the capitalist purchases and puts to work. The owner of capital appropriates this surplus value, which accounts for the possibility of realizing a profit.

In recent years there has been considerable controversy among Marxist scholars about the

viability of the labor theory of value on which this account of exploitation relies.<sup>12</sup> John Roemer, for example, develops a theory of exploitation which claims to preserve the theoretical and practical purposes of Marx's theory, but without assuming a distinction between values and prices and without being restricted to a concept of abstract, homogeneous labor.<sup>13</sup> My purpose here is not to engage in technical economic disputes, but to indicate the place of a concept of exploitation in a conception of oppression.

Marx's theory of exploitation lacks an explicitly normative meaning, even though the judgment that workers are exploited clearly has normative as well as descriptive power in Marxian theory.<sup>14</sup> C. B. MacPherson reconstructs the Marxian idea of exploitation in a more explicitly normative form.<sup>15</sup> The injustice of capitalist society consists in the fact that some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes, and for the benefit of other people. Through the institutions of private ownership of the means of production, and through markets that allocate labor and the ability to buy goods, capitalism systematically transfers the powers of some persons to others, thereby augmenting their powers. In this process of the transfer of powers, moreover, according to MacPherson, the capitalist class acquires and maintains extractive power, which gives it the continued ability to extract benefits from workers. Not only are powers transferred from workers to capitalists, but also the powers of workers diminish by more than the amount of transfer, because workers suffer deprivation, a lack of control, and hence a lack of self-respect. Justice, then, requires eliminating the institutional forms that enable and enforce this process of transfer. Justice requires replacing them with institutional forms that enable all to develop and use their capacities in a way that do not inhibit, but rather enhance, others developing and using theirs.

The central insight expressed with the concept of exploitation, then, is that domination occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of some people to benefit others. The injustice of class division does not consist only in the fact that some people have great wealth while most people have little and some are severely deprived.<sup>16</sup> The theory of exploitation shows that this relation of power and inequality is produced and reproduced through a systematic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to

maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the haves.

Many writers have cogently argued that the Marxian concept of exploitation is too narrow to encompass all forms of domination and oppression.<sup>17</sup> In particular, by confining itself to examining class domination and oppression, the Marxian concept of exploitation does not contribute to an understanding of such group oppressions as sexism and racism. The question, then, is whether the concept of exploitation can be broadened to include other ways that the labor and energy expenditure of one group benefits another, thus reproducing a relation of domination between them.

Feminists have had little difficulty showing that women's oppression consists partly in a systematic and unreciprocated transfer of powers from women to men. Women's oppression consists not merely in an inequality of status, power, and wealth resulting from men's excluding women from privileged activities. The freedom, power, status, and self-realization of men is possible precisely because women work for them. Gender exploitation has two aspects, transfer of the fruits of material labor to men, and the transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men.

Christine Delphy for example, theorizes marriage as a class relation in which women's labor benefits men without comparable remuneration.<sup>18</sup> She makes it clear that the exploitation consists not in the sort of work that women do in the home, for it might be various kinds of tasks, but the fact that they perform tasks for someone else on whom they are dependent. Thus, for example, in most systems of agricultural production in the world, men take to market goods women have produced, and more often than not men receive the status and often the entire income from this labor.

With the concept of sex-affective production, Ann Ferguson identifies another form of the transfer of women's energies to men.<sup>19</sup> Women provide men and children with emotional care, and provide men with sexual satisfaction, and as a class receive little of either from men.<sup>20</sup> The gender socialization of women makes us tend to be more attentive to interactive dynamics than men, and makes women good at providing empathy and support for people's feelings and at smoothing over interactive tensions. Both men and women look to women as nurturers of their personal lives, and women frequently complain that when they look to men for emotional support they do not receive it.<sup>21</sup> The

norms of heterosexuality, moreover, are oriented around male pleasure, and consequently many women receive little satisfaction from their sexual interaction with men.<sup>22</sup>

Most feminist theories of gender exploitation have concentrated on the institutional structure of the patriarchal family. Recently, however, feminists have begun to theorize relations of gender exploitation enacted in the contemporary workplace and through the state. Carol Brown argues that as men have removed themselves from responsibility for children, many women have become dependent on the state for subsistence as they continue to bear nearly total responsibility for child rearing.<sup>23</sup> This creates a new system of the exploitation of women's domestic labor mediated by those state institutions, which she calls public patriarchy.

In twentieth-century capitalist economies, the workplaces that women have been entering in increasing numbers serve as another important site of gender exploitation. David Alexander argues that most typically feminine jobs have gender tasks involving sexual labor, nurturing, caring for a person's body, or smoothing over relations through personality.<sup>24</sup> In these ways, women's energies are expended in workplaces that enhance the status of, please, or comfort others, usually men; and these gender based labors of waitresses, clerical workers, nurses, and other caretakers often go unnoticed and under-compensated.

To summarize, women are exploited in the Marxian sense to the degree that they are wage workers. Some have argued that women's domestic labor is also a form of capitalist class exploitation insofar as it is labor covered by the wages a family receives. As a class, however, women undergo specific forms of gender exploitation – ways the energies and power of women are expended, often unnoticed and unacknowledged, usually to benefit men by releasing them for more important and creative work, enhancing their status or the environment around them, or providing men with sexual or emotional service.

Race is a structure of oppression at least as basic as class or gender. Are there, then, racially specific forms of exploitation? This is different from the question of whether racial groups are subjected to intense capitalist exploitation. Racial groups in the US, especially blacks and Latinos, are oppressed through capitalist superexploitation resulting from a segmented labor market that

tends to reserve skilled, high-paying, unionized jobs for whites. There is wide disagreement about whether such superexploitation benefits whites as a group or only benefits the capitalist class, and I do not intend to resolve that dispute here.<sup>25</sup>

However one answers the question about capitalist superexploitation of racial groups, is it also possible to conceptualize a form of exploitation that is racially specific on analogy with the gender specific forms I have discussed? The category of *menial* labor might provide an opening for such conceptualization. In its derivation "menial" means the labor of servants. Wherever there is racism, including in the US today, there is the assumption, more or less enforced, that members of the oppressed racial groups are ought to be servants of those, or some of those, in the privileged group. In white racist societies this generally means that many white people have dark- or yellow-skinned domestic servants, and in the US today there remains significant race structuring of private household service.

In the US today much service labor has gone public: anybody can have servants if they go to a good hotel, a good restaurant, or hire a cleaning service. Servants often attend the daily – and nightly – activities of business executives, government officials, and other high status professionals. In our society there remains strong cultural pressure to fill servant jobs – like bell hop, porter, chamber maid, bus boy, and so on – with black and Latin workers. These jobs entail a transfer of energies whereby the servers enhance the status of the served, to place them in an aristocracy – the rule of the best.

Menial labor today refers to more than service, however, but to any servile, unskilled, low-paying work lacking in autonomy, and in which a person is subject to take orders from several people. Menial work tends to be auxiliary work, instrumental to another person's work, where that other person receives primary recognition for doing the job. Laborers on a construction site, for example, are at the beck and call of welders, electricians, carpenters, and other skilled workers, who receive recognition for the job done. In the history of the United States, explicit racial discrimination reserved menial work for blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, and Chinese, and menial work still tends to be linked to black and Latino workers.<sup>26</sup> I offer this category of menial labor as a form of racially specific

exploitation, only as a proposal, however, which needs discussion.

## 2 *Marginalization*

Increasingly in the United States, racial oppression occurs more in the form of marginalization than exploitation. Marginals are people the system of labor markets cannot or will not employ. Not only in Third World capitalist countries, but also in most Western capitalist societies, there is a growing underclass of people permanently confined to lives of social marginality, the majority of whom are racially marked – blacks or Indians in Latin America, blacks, East Indians, Eastern Europeans, or North Africans in Europe.

Marginalization is by no means the fate only of racially marked groups, however. In the United States a shamefully large proportion of the population is marginal: old people, and increasingly people who are not very old but get laid off from their jobs and cannot find new work; young people, especially black or Latino, who cannot find first or second jobs; many single mothers and their children; other people involuntarily unemployed; many mentally or physically disabled people; and Americans Indians, especially those on reservations.

Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life, potentially then subject to severe material deprivation and even extermination. The material deprivation marginalization often causes certainly is unjust, especially in a society where others have plenty. Contemporary advanced capitalist societies in principle have acknowledged the injustice of material deprivation caused by marginalization, and have taken some steps to address it by providing welfare payments and services. The continuance of this welfare state is by no means assured, and in most welfare state societies, especially the United States, benefits are not sufficient to eliminate large scale suffering and deprivation.

Material deprivation, which can be addressed by redistributive social policies, is not, however, the extent of the harm caused by marginalization. Two categories of injustice beyond distribution are associated with marginality in advanced capitalist societies. The provision of welfare itself produces new injustice when it deprives dependent persons

of rights and freedoms that others have. If justice requires that every person have the opportunity to develop and exercise his or her capacities, finally, then marginalization is unjust primarily because it blocks such opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways.

Liberalism traditionally asserts the right of all rational autonomous agents to equal citizenship. Early bourgeois liberalism made explicit that citizenship excluded all those whose reason was questionable or not fully developed, and all those not independent.<sup>27</sup> Thus poor people, women, the mad and the feeble minded, and children were explicitly excluded from citizenship, and many of these were housed in institutions modeled on the modern prison: poor houses, insane asylums, schools.

In our own society the exclusion of dependent persons from equal citizenship rights is only barely hidden beneath the surface. Because they are dependent on bureaucratic institutions for support or services, old people, poor people, and mentally or physically disabled people are subject to patronizing, punitive, demeaning, and arbitrary treatment by the policies and people associated with welfare bureaucracies. Being a dependent in this society implies being legitimately subject to often arbitrary and invasive authority of social service providers and other public and private bureaucrats, who enforce rules with which the marginal must comply, and otherwise exercise power over the conditions of her or his life. In meeting needs of the marginalized, with the aid of social scientific disciplines, the welfare agencies also construct the needs themselves. Medical and social service professionals know what is good for those they serve, and the marginals and dependents themselves do not have the right to claim to know what is good for them.<sup>28</sup> Dependency thus implies in this society, as it has in all liberal societies, a sufficient condition to suspend rights to privacy, respect, and individual choice.

Although dependency thus produces conditions of injustice in our society, dependency in itself should not and need not be oppressive. We cannot imagine a society in which some people would not need to be dependent on others at least some of the time: children, sick people, women recovering from childbirth, old people who have become frail, and depressed or otherwise emotionally needy persons have the moral right to be dependent on others for subsistence and support.

An important contribution of feminist moral theory has consisted in questioning the deeply held assumption that moral agency and full citizenship require that a person be autonomous and independent. Feminists have exposed such an assumption as inappropriately individualistic and derived from a specifically male experience of social relations, valuing competition, and solitary achievement.<sup>29</sup> Female experience of social relations, arising both from women's typical domestic care responsibilities and from the kinds of paid work that many women do, tends to recognize dependence as a basic human condition. Whereas on the autonomy model a just society would as much as possible give people the opportunity to be independent, the feminist model instead envisions justice as according respect and decision-making participation to those who are dependent as well as those who are independent.<sup>30</sup> Dependence should not be a reason to be deprived of choice and respect, and much of the oppression, many marginals experience would diminish if a less individualistic model of rights prevailed.

Marginalization does not cease to be oppressive when one has shelter and food. Many old people, for example, have sufficient means to live comfortably but remain oppressed in their marginal status. Even if marginals were provided a comfortable material life within institutions that respected their freedom and dignity, injustices of marginality would remain in the form of uselessness, boredom, and lack of self-respect. Most of this society's productive and recognized activities take place in contexts of organized social cooperation, and social structures and processes that close persons out of participation in such social cooperation are unjust.

The fact of marginalization raises basic structural issues of justice. In particular we must consider what is just about a connection between participation in productive activities of social cooperation, on the one hand, and acquisition of the means of consumption, on the other. As marginalization is increasing, with no sign of abatement, some social policy analysts have introduced the idea of a "social wage" as a guaranteed socially provided income not tied to the wage system. Restructuring activities of production and service provision to ensure that everyone able and willing has socially recognized work to do, moreover, also implies organization of socially productive activity at least partly outside of a wage system.<sup>31</sup>

### 3 Powerlessness

As I have indicated, the Marxian idea of class is important because it helps reveal the structure of exploitation: that some people have their power and wealth because they profit from the labor of others. For this reason I reject the claim some make that a traditional class exploitation model fails to capture the structure of contemporary society. It is still the case that the labor of most people in the society augments the power of a few; whatever their differences from non-professional workers, most professional workers share with them not being members of the capitalist class.

An adequate conception of oppression, however, cannot ignore the experience of social division colloquially referred to as the difference between the "middle class" and the "working class," a division structured by the social division of labor between professionals and non-professionals. Rather than expanding or revising the Marxian concept of class to take account of this experience, as some writers do, I suggest that we follow Weber and describe this as a difference in *status* rather than class.<sup>32</sup> Being a professional entails occupying a status position that non-professionals lack, creating a condition of oppression that non-professionals suffer. I shall call this kind of oppression "powerlessness."

The absence of genuine democracy in the US means that most people do not participate in making decisions that regularly affect the conditions of their lives and actions. In this sense most people lack significant power. Powerlessness, however, describes the lives of people who have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect. Powerlessness names the oppressive situations Sennet and Cobb describe in their famous study of working class men.<sup>33</sup>

The clearest way for me to think of this powerless status is negatively: the powerless lack the status and sense of self that professionals tend to have. There are three aspects of status privilege that professionals have, the lack of which produces oppression for non-professionals.

First, acquiring and practicing a profession has an expansive, progressive character. Being professional usually requires a college education and learning a specialized knowledge that entails working with symbols and concepts. In acquiring

one's profession, a person experiences progress in learning the expertise, and usually when one begins practicing one enters a career, that is, a working life of growth or progress in professional development. The life of the non-professional by comparison is powerless in the sense that it lacks this orientation toward the progressive development of one's capacities.

Second, while most professionals have supervisors and do not have power to affect many decisions or the action of very many people, most nevertheless have considerable day-to-day work autonomy. Professionals usually have some authority over others, moreover, either over workers they supervise, or over auxiliaries, or over clients. Non-professionals, on the other hand, lack autonomy, and both in their working lives and in their consumer-client lives, they often stand under the authority of professionals.

Though having its material basis in a division of labor between "mental" and "manual" work, the group division between "middle class" and "working class" designates not a division only in working life, but also in nearly all aspects of social life. Professionals and non-professionals belong to different cultures in the US. The two groups tend to live in segregated neighborhoods or even different towns, not least because of the actions and decisions of real estate people. They tend to have different tastes in food, decor, clothes, music, and vacations. Members of the two groups socialize for the most part with others in the same status group. While there is some intergroup mobility between generations, for the most part the children of professionals become professionals and the children of non-professionals do not.

Thus thirdly, the privileges of the professional extend beyond the workplace to elevate a whole way of life, which consists in being "respectable." To treat someone with respect is to be prepared to listen to what they have to say or to do what they request because they have some authority, expertise, or influence.

The norms of respectability in our society are associated specifically with professional culture. Professional dress, speech, tastes, demeanor, all connote respectability. Generally professionals expect and receive respect from others. In restaurants, banks, hotels, real estate offices, and many other such public places, professionals typically receive more respectful treatment than non-professionals. For this reason non-professionals seeking a loan or a job,

or to buy a house or a car, will often try to look "professional" and "respectable" in these settings. The privilege of this professional respectability starkly appears in the dynamics of racism and sexism. In daily interchange women and men of color must prove their respectability. At first they are often not treated by strangers with respectful distance or deference. Once people discover that this woman or that Puerto Rican man is a college teacher or a business executive, however, people often behave more respectfully toward her or him. Working class white men, on the other hand, are often treated with respect until their working class status is revealed.

#### 4 *Cultural imperialism*

Exploitation, marginality, and powerlessness all refer to relations of power and oppression that occur by virtue of the social division of labor: who works for whom, who does not work, and how the content of work in one position is defined in relation to others. These three categories refer to the structural and institutional relations that delimit people's material lives, including but not limited to the resources they have access to, the concrete opportunity they have or do not have to develop and exercise capacities in involving, socially recognized ways that enhance rather than diminish their lives. These kinds of oppression are a matter of concrete power in relation to others, who benefits from whom, and who is dispensable.

Recent theorists of movements of group liberation, especially feminists and black liberation theorists, have also given prominence to a rather different experience of oppression, which I shall call cultural imperialism.<sup>34</sup> This is the experience of existing with a society whose dominant meanings render the particular perspectives and point of view of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other.

Cultural imperialism consists in the universalization of one group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. Some groups have exclusive or primary access to what Nancy Fraser calls the means of interpretation and communication in a society.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the dominant cultural products of the society, that is, those most widely disseminated, express the experience, values, goals, and achievements of the groups that produce them. The cultural products also express their perspective

on and interpretation of events and elements in the society, including the other groups in the society, insofar as they are noticed at all. Often without noticing they do so, the dominant groups project their own experience as representative of humanity as such.

An encounter with groups different from the dominant group, however, challenges its claim to universality. The dominant group saves its position by bringing the other group under the measure of its dominant norms. Consequently, the difference of women from men, Native Americans or Africans from Europeans, Jews from Christians, homosexuals from heterosexuals, or workers from professionals thus becomes reconstructed as deviance and inferiority. The dominant groups and their cultural expressions are the normal, the universal, and thereby unremarkable. Since the dominant group's cultural expressions are the only expressions that receive wide dissemination, the dominant groups construct the differences which some groups exhibit as lack and negation in relation to the norms, and those groups become marked out as Other.

Victims of cultural imperialism experience a paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and rendered invisible. As remarkable, deviant beings, the culturally dominated are stamped with an essence. In contrast, the privileged are indefinable because they are individual; each is whatever he or she wants to be, they are in what they do, and by their doings they are judged. The stereotype marks and defines the culturally dominated, confines them to a nature which is usually attached in some way to their bodies, and thus which cannot easily be denied. These stereotypes so permeate the society that they are not noticed as contestable. Just as everyone knows that the earth goes around the sun, so everyone knows that gay people are promiscuous, that Indians are alcoholics, and that women are good with children.

Those living under cultural imperialism find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, and placed by a system of dominant meanings they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them. The dominant culture's stereotyped, marked, and inferiorized images of the group must be internalized by group members at least to the degree that they are forced to react to behaviors of others that express or are influenced

by those images. This creates for the culturally oppressed the experience that W. E. B. DuBois called "double consciousness." "This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>36</sup> This consciousness is double because the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped visions of herself or himself. The subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, but receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that he or she is different, marked, or inferior.

People in culturally oppressed groups often maintain a sense of positive subjectivity because they can affirm and recognize one another as sharing similar experiences and perspectives on social life. The group defined by the dominant culture as deviant, as a stereotyped Other, is culturally different from the dominant group, because the status of Otherness creates specific experiences not shared by the dominant group, and because culturally oppressed groups also are often socially segregated and occupy specific positions in the social division of labor. They express their specific group experiences and interpretations of the world to one another, developing and perpetuating their own culture. Double consciousness, then, occurs because one finds one's being defined by two cultures: a dominant and a subordinate culture.

Cultural imperialism involves the paradox of experiencing oneself as invisible at the same time that one is marked out and noticed as different. The perspective of other groups dominate the culture without their noticing it as a perspective, and their cultural expressions are widely disseminated. These dominant cultural expressions often simply pay no attention to the existence and experience of those other groups, only to mention or refer to them in stereotyped or marginalized ways. This, then, is the injustice of cultural imperialism: that the oppressed group's experience and interpretation of social life finds no expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life.

## 5 Violence

Finally, many groups suffer the oppression of systematic and legitimate violence. The members of

some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person. In US society women, blacks, Asians, Arabs, gay men, and lesbians live under such threat of violence, and in at least some regions Jews, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and other Spanish-speaking Americans must fear such violence as well. Violation may also take the form of name calling or petty harassment which intends to degrade or humiliate, and always signals an underlying threat of physical attack.

Such violence is systematic because it is directed at any member of the group simply because he or she is a member of that group. Any woman, for example, has reason to fear rape. The violence to which these oppressed groups are subject, moreover, is usually legitimate in the sense that most people regard it as unsurprising and it usually goes unpunished. Police beatings or killings of black youths, for example, are rarely publicized, rarely provoke moral outrage on the part of most white people, and rarely receive punishment.

An important aspect of the kind of random but systemic violence I am referring to here is its utter irrationality. Xenophobic violence is different from the violence of state or ruling class repression. Repressive violence has a rational, though evil, motive: rulers use it as a coercive tool to maintain their power. Many accounts of racist, sexist, or homophobic violence try to explain it as motivated by a desire to maintain group privilege or domination. I agree that fear of violence functions to help keep these oppressed groups subordinate. I think the causes of such violence must be traced to unconscious structures of identity formation which project onto some groups the fluid, bodily aspect of the subject that threatens the rigid unity of that identity.

### C Conclusion

The five faces of oppression that I have explicated here function as criteria of oppression, not as a full theoretical account of oppression. With them we can tell whether a group is oppressed, according to objective social structures and behaviors. Being subject to any one of these five conditions is sufficient for calling a group oppressed. Most of the groups I listed earlier as oppressed in US society

experience more than one of these forms and some experience all five.

Nearly all, if not all, groups said by contemporary social movements to be oppressed in our society suffer cultural imperialism. Which other oppressions are experienced by which groups, however, is quite variable. Working class people are exploited and powerless, for example, but if employed and white do not experience marginalization and violence. Gay men, on the other hand, are not *qua* gay exploited or powerless, but they experience severe cultural imperialism and violence. Similarly, Jews and Arabs as groups are victims of cultural imperialism and violence, though many members of these groups also suffer exploitation or powerlessness. Old people are oppressed by marginalization and cultural imperialism, and this is also true of physically or mentally disabled people. As a group women are subject to gender-based exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Racism in the United States associates blacks and Latinos with marginalization, even though many members of these groups escape that condition; members of these groups often suffer all five forms of oppression.

With these criteria I have specifically avoided defining structures and kinds of oppression according to the groups oppressed: racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism. The forms of group oppression these terms name are not homologous, and the five criteria can help describe how and why not. The five criteria also help show that while no group oppression is reducible to or explained by any other group oppression, the oppression of one group is not a closed system with its own attributes, but overlaps with the oppression of other groups. With these criteria, moreover, we can claim that one group is more oppressed than another, insofar as it is subject to more of these five conditions, without thereby theoretically privileging a particular form of oppression or one oppressed group.

Are there any connections among these five forms of oppression? Why are particular groups subject to various combinations of them? The answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this chapter. My project here is analytical and descriptive, not explanatory. Answering these questions is important to the theoretical project of understanding oppression. I believe they cannot be answered by an a priori account, however, but require a specific explanatory account of the connections among forms of oppression for each social context and for each group.

## Notes

- 1 Bernard Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1984).
- 2 Marlene Fried, "The Invisibility of Oppression," *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. XI, no. 1 (1979), pp. 18–29.
- 3 Marilyn Frye, "Oppression" in *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983), pp. 1–16.
- 4 Marilyn Friedman and Larry May, "Harming Women as a Group," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (1985), pp. 207–34.
- 5 Peter French, "Types of Collectivities and Blame," *The Personalist*, Vol. 56 (1975), pp. 160–9.
- 6 Cf. Jeffrey Ross, Introduction to *The Mobilization of Collective Identity*, ed. Ross and Cottrell (University Press of America, 1980); also, Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).
- 7 Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).
- 8 Milton Fisk, *Ethics and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), Part I.
- 9 E.g., Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso Books, 1975).
- 10 Cf. Manuel Castells, *The Economic Crisis and American Society* (Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 138–61.
- 11 See Roger Gottlieb, *History and Subjectivity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).
- 12 See R. P. Wolff, *Understanding Marx* (Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 13 John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 14 Alan Buchanan, *Marx and Justice* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1980).
- 15 C. B. MacPherson, *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), especially Chapter III.
- 16 Cf. Alan Buchanan, pp. 44–9; Nancy Holmstrom, "Exploitation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. VII, no. 2 (1977), pp. 353–69.
- 17 Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 242; Arthur Vrittan and Mary Maynard, *Sexism, Racism and Oppression* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 93; Raymond Murphy, "Exploitation or Exclusion?" *Sociology*, Vol. 19, no. 2 (May 1985), pp. 225–43; Herbert Gintis and Samuel Bowles, *Capitalism and Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).
- 18 Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).
- 19 See her "Women as a New Revolutionary Class" in *Between Labor and Capital*, ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979), and "On Conceiving Motherhood and Sexuality: A Feminist Materialist Approach" in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. by Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1984).
- 20 Cf. Brittan and Maynard, pp. 142–8.
- 21 Barbara Easton, "Feminism and the Contemporary Family," *Socialist Review*, No. 39 (May/June 1978), pp. 11–36.
- 22 Rhonda Gottlieb, "The Political Economy of Sexuality," *Review of Radical Political Economy*, Vol. 16, no. 1 (1984), pp. 143–65.
- 23 Carol Brown, "Mothers, Fathers and Children: From Private to Public Patriarchy" in *Women and Revolution*, Sargent, ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1981), pp. 239–68; cf. Ellen Boris and Peter Bardaglio, "The Transformation of Patriarchy: The Historic Role of the State" in *Families, Politics and Public Policy*, Diamond, ed. (New York: Longman, 1983), pp. 79–93; Kathy Ferguson, *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984).
- 24 David Alexander, "Gendered Job Traits and Women's Occupations" (PhD Dissertation, Economics, University of Massachusetts, 1987).
- 25 Michael Reich, *Racial Inequality* (Princeton University Press, 1981).
- 26 Al Symanski, "The Structure of Race," *Review of Radical Political Economy*, Vol. 17, no. 4 (1985), pp. 106–20.
- 27 Gintis and Bowles, 1986.
- 28 Nancy Fraser, "Women, Welfare, and the Politics of Need Interpretation," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter 1987), pp. 103–22; Kathy Ferguson, 1984, Chapter 4.
- 29 Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Marilyn Friedman, "Care and Context in Moral Reasoning" in Carol Harding, ed., *Moral Dilemmas: Philosophical and Psychological Issues in the Development of Moral Reasoning* (Chicago: Precedent, 1985).
- 30 Virginia Held, "A Non-Contractual Society" (paper given at the conference on Feminist Moral, Legal and Political Theory, at the University of Cincinnati, November, 1986).
- 31 Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism: Contemporary Transformation of Work and Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), Chs 1–3.
- 32 Max Weber, "Classes, Status Groups and Parties" in *Weber: Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G. Runciman (Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 43–64; David Beetham, *Max Weber and the Theory of Modern Politics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1985), pp. 79–82.

- 33 Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
- 34 Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice'," *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 6, no. 6 (1983), pp. 573-81.
- 35 Nancy Fraser, "Social Movements vs. Disciplinary Bureaucracies: The Discourses of Social Needs," CHS Occasional Paper #8 (Center for Humanistic Studies, University of Minnesota, 1987), pp. 1-37
- 36 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Signet, 1903, 1969).